

Staying Relevant on Human Rights

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Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's [recent statement in Hanoi that the U.S. is concerned about human rights violations in Vietnam](#) is precisely the kind of rhetoric for which human rights and democracy activists have been calling. Demonstrations of U.S. concern about these issues made by high level officials is an integral part of efforts to improve human rights in countries like Vietnam. Clinton's remarks also signify, if not a shift, than certainly a break from [comments she made in 2009 in China](#) where she seemed to indicate that China's human rights violations were not all that important to the U.S. suggesting that for the U.S. and China "it might be better to agree to disagree" on those issues. Clearly, China plays a different global role than Vietnam and the U.S., as Clinton pointed out on that trip, has a number of other very important issues on which it needs to work with China, but the change in the tone of her remarks is striking.

Although Clinton's comments undoubtedly have pleased many in the U.S. and abroad who are concerned with human rights, it remains true that for many years, statements like Clinton's on Vietnam have provoked charges of hypocrisy from some quarters aimed at the U.S. During the Cold War, most notably, the U.S. styled itself as the defender of liberty and freedom around the world while supporting right wing dictatorships in many corners of the world which were far from free or democratic. Today, this description remains at least somewhat accurate. The U.S. continues to present itself as the global advocate for freedom and democracy while looking away from human rights violations that occur in countries on whose assistance we depend for fighting terrorism or the war in Afghanistan.

Criticizing the U.S. on the grounds of a hypocritical foreign policy is nothing new, albeit somewhat reductive. Today it is not the hypocrisy of Clinton's comments that seem so notable. It is their relevance, or more precisely their lack of relevance. Clinton's focus on human rights will undoubtedly be appreciated by human rights activists, but may have very little effect on the human rights environment in Vietnam.

In the current global political environment it is not at all clear what the U.S. can do other than talk about human rights. They have little leverage over Vietnam, or any other foreign government whose behavior they would like to change. There are, of course, exceptions to this, but it seems like the U.S. is reluctant to apply pressure even to those governments over which they have leverage. Instead, governments generally understand that the best response to visits like Clinton's is to smile politely and, after the U.S. official leaves the country, to go about business as usual.

At other times in American history, U.S. support for repressive regimes, or military aggression overseas made it difficult for the U.S. to claim the moral high ground around issues like freedom and human rights. This is still an issue, but the result of recent U.S.

adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan is that the U.S. is increasingly viewed as unable to achieve its goals. Most countries understand that U.S. military might is not going to be used against them, and that the persuasive powers of the U.S. are, in fact, not very strong.

The presence of other models and sources of assistance, such as China, as well as the failure of the U.S. to develop appropriate methods to coerce unwilling governments to liberalize has created more obstacles for the U.S. in countries like Vietnam. Nonetheless, persuasion is a critical part of diplomacy, but it is something which has become increasingly difficult for the U.S. Supporting human rights verbally without being able to deliver not only does little for human rights but makes the U.S. look even weaker in the eyes of many.